

AMENDMENTS TO THE CLAIMS

1. (Currently Amended) Bleached crosslinked fibers, comprising cellulose fibers reacted with an effective amount of a crosslinking agent in the presence of an effective amount of a C<sub>4</sub>-C<sub>12</sub> polyol and bleached with a bleaching agent, said bleached crosslinked fibers having a Whiteness Index at least one unit greater than crosslinked cellulose fibers comprising cellulosic fibers reacted with an effective amount of a crosslinking agent in the presence of an effective amount of a C<sub>4</sub>-C<sub>12</sub> polyol without bleaching, wherein said bleached crosslinked fibers have a brightness greater than about 80.

2. (Original) The fibers of Claim 1, wherein the crosslinking agent is an  $\alpha$ -hydroxypolycarboxylic acid.

3. (Original) The fibers of Claim 2, wherein the  $\alpha$ -hydroxypolycarboxylic acid is selected from the group consisting of citric acid, malic acid, tartaric acid, tartronic acid,  $\alpha$ -hydroxyglutaric acid, and citramalic acid and mixtures thereof.

4. (Original) The fibers of Claim 3, wherein the crosslinking agent is citric acid.

5. (Original) The fibers of Claim 3, wherein the crosslinking agent is malic acid.

6. (Original) The fibers of Claim 1, wherein the polyol is selected from the group consisting of acyclic polyols, alicyclic polyols, and heterosides and mixtures thereof.

7. (Original) The fibers of Claim 6, wherein the acyclic polyol is selected from the group consisting of erythritol, xylitol, arabitol, ribitol, sorbitol, mannitol, perseitol, and volemitol and mixtures thereof.

8. (Original) The fibers of Claim 7, wherein the acyclic polyol is sorbitol.

9. (Original) The fibers of Claim 1, wherein the bleaching agent comprises hydrogen peroxide.

10. (Original) The fibers of Claim 1, wherein the bleaching agent comprises hydrogen peroxide in combination with sodium hydroxide.

11. (Canceled)

12. (Canceled)

13. (Original) The fibers of Claim 1, wherein the wet bulk is about 15.5 cc/g or greater.

14. (Original) An absorbent product comprising the fibers of Claim 1.

15. (Original) The product of Claim 14, wherein the product is an infant diaper, adult incontinence product, or feminine hygiene product.

16. (Original) The product of Claim 14, wherein the product is a tissue or towel.